The Islamic System of Education

— A Study Compilation (Translation) —

Compiled and translated from:
The Islamic System of Education — Maulana Syed Abul Ala Maududi
(Memorandum to Pakistan's National Education Commission)

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Introduction: Background of the Essay

Source: The Islamic System of Education — Maulana Syed Abul Ala Maududi — pages 5

The following essay is, in fact, the memorandum that Maulana Maududi sent to Pakistan's National Education Commission on the subject of education reform. Since the scope of the questionnaire issued by the Commission was so limited that no proposal for fundamental changes could be made within its bounds, this essay was written independently — with the Commission's permission — outside that scope.

Before proposing reforms to this country's existing education system, it is necessary that we thoroughly understand the flaws currently present in it. Without this we cannot know how, and in what form, reform should take place. At present two kinds of education systems prevail in our country: one on which the old-style madrasas run, training scholars (ulama) to meet our religious needs; the other prevalent in our colleges and universities, training workers to run the whole system of life outside our religious sphere. Having properly understood the flaws of both, we must propose a single education system able to fulfil all our national needs at once, ending the present educational duality that rests on the misguided notion of separating religion from worldly life.

Chapter One: The Old and New Education Systems

1. The Reality of the Old Education System and Its Decline

Source: The Islamic System of Education — Maulana Syed Abul Ala Maududi — pages 6–8

There is a common misunderstanding about our old education system — that it was our ancient religious education system. It was indeed a system of religious education, but not a civil-service system: it was devised in ancient times to meet the needs of Muslim governments. Its usefulness effectively ended the very day British rule was imposed here, since there was no longer any place in the new state for people trained under it.

But because our centuries-old civilizational heritage existed, and it still contained some material (though not enough) for our religious needs, at the start of the era of subjugation a fairly large section of our nation felt this system should somehow be kept alive — so that our national fabric would not be entirely severed from its ancestral heritage, scattered, and our national existence extinguished altogether.

Despite its old standing, this system in reality spreads very little religious knowledge. As much emphasis as is placed on the era's philosophy, logic, and grammar, the same is not placed on the Qur'an, Hadith, and the essential teachings of religion. Even today there is no Arabic madrasa whose curriculum includes the complete Qur'an — only one or two surahs (al-Baqarah or Aal-e-Imran) are formally taught.

In this way our education system is severely inadequate even for the religious needs for which it was preserved. As for worldly needs, whatever connection it had to them had already ended at the start of the last century.

2. The Purpose of the English System and Its Consequences

Source: The Islamic System of Education — Maulana Syed Abul Ala Maududi — pages 9–12

Next, consider the education system the British established here. In setting up any education system anywhere in the world, the first fundamental question is: what kind of person do you want to produce, and what image of humanity guides how you want to shape people through education? Judged by this question, the British certainly did not hold the image of humanity that Muslims held. They did not establish this system to keep Muslim civilization alive; rather they wanted to produce people useful to their own country — people who understood their language, could relate to it, and knew the principles on which they wanted to run the country.

None of the sciences taught in this system had, or could have had, any trace of Islam in them. In Europe itself, all these sciences developed entirely at the hands of people who had turned away from God; the religious class there had already been pushed out of the field of thought and action. The British brought these sciences — from people who did not deny God but felt no need for His guidance in worldly life — and had them taught here the same way.

This education is not only devoid of God-consciousness and Islamic ethics; worse, it fails to produce in our youth even the basic human ethics without which a nation cannot survive, let alone progress. There is no sense of duty in it, no diligence, no discipline of time, no patience or steadfastness, no resolve, no self-control, no loyalty to anything beyond self-interest. There is scarcely a national character among them — hardly anyone, however respectable his position, who hesitates to commit the worst dishonesty.

Chapter Two: The Need for a Revolutionary Step

1. Determining the Purpose of Education

Source: The Islamic System of Education — Maulana Syed Abul Ala Maududi — pages 13–14

In shaping this new education system, the first thing we must decide is: what, in our view, is the purpose of education? Some believe its purpose is merely to acquire knowledge — that people should be educated to make a wholly objective study of life's problems and draw independent conclusions. But such objective study cannot be done like a camera taking photographs. A human being also has a mind behind his eyes, which in any case holds its own point of view.

A whole way of life is built on the foundation of thought, which we call culture. If we possess a culture — if we are a nation with its own beliefs, its own philosophy of life, its own goal, and certain principles governing its life — then we must prepare our new generations to understand this culture, value it, keep it alive, and advance it further on its own foundations. Every nation in the world establishes its own permanent education system for exactly this purpose.

2. Ending the Separation of Religion and Worldly Life

Source: The Islamic System of Education — Maulana Syed Abul Ala Maududi — pages 15–16

The second principle to keep in view is that, in the whole education system we intend to build, we must abolish the separation between religion and worldly life. This idea of separating the two is a Buddhist, Christian, or Hindu-yogic notion; Islam does not permit its

acceptance. We cannot imagine a greater mistake than accepting, in our education system, our social order, our country and state, this idea of separation. We do not accept that one part of our education should be worldly and another religious.

Islam is not a religion that tells you to run worldly affairs however you like and simply attach a few beliefs and rituals to them as an appendix. It was never content with being a mere appendix to life; it wants to be your guide and method of action for the whole of life. It does not merely speak of an otherworldly realm; it fully engages with the problems of this world. If your entire education is from a religious point of view, study philosophy from that point of view too, so you may become a Muslim philosopher. Study science, and rise as a Muslim scientist.

3. Character Formation

 Source: The Islamic System of Education — Maulana Syed Abul Ala Maududi — pages 16–19

The third fundamental principle is that character formation must be given more importance than book learning. Merely teaching books and imparting skills will not accomplish our task. We need every young person to develop an Islamic character and mindset within him — whether he becomes a scientist, a social-science expert, or is being prepared for civil service — whatever he becomes, Islamic character must be present in him. A person without Islamic morals, whatever else he may be, is of no use to us.

This Islamic mindset should be cultivated from day one, so that the same foundation remains embedded right through the final stages of education — even when the student becomes a doctor. Second, the moral concepts and values Islam presents should be impressed on children's minds through every lesson of every subject, down to arithmetic problems. Love and desire should be created for whatever is called virtue, and hatred instilled for whatever is declared evil.

Intense hatred of bribery should be aroused; sharp criticism made of those who earn through forbidden means; and deep hatred instilled against lying, deception, selfishness, theft, forgery, breach of trust, alcohol, usury, gambling, oppression, and injustice.

Chapter Three: The Practical Framework

1. Primary Education

 Source: The Islamic System of Education — Maulana Syed Abul Ala Maududi — pages 17–20

First consider primary education — the very foundation on which the edifice of education is built. Four things should be woven into every subject of it. First, it should be impressed on the child's mind from every angle that this world is God's kingdom and a manifestation of His power; that we are appointed here as God's vicegerents; that everything here is a trust from God placed in our care, for which we are accountable to Him. We want that from the moment a child enters primary school until its final stage, these concepts run through every lesson — so that when the child learns his letters, he learns them starting with 'Allah', not as bare abstractions.

Second, the moral concepts Islam presents should be impressed on children's minds through the lessons themselves. Third, the basic articles of faith should be firmly instilled at the

primary stage. Fourth, children should be taught the manner of Islamic living and the matters of religious law that a ten- or twelve-year-old should know: purification, ablution, prayer and fasting, what is forbidden and permitted, and desirable social conduct.

2. Secondary Education

Source: The Islamic System of Education — Maulana Syed Abul Ala Maududi — pages 20–22

Next, high-school education. Here the first and most necessary thing is that Arabic be taught as a compulsory language. Islam's entire original source is in Arabic — the Qur'an, the Hadith, and almost all early juristic and scholarly work, as well as the original sources of Islamic history. No one can properly grasp the spirit of Islam until he can read the Qur'an directly in its own language.

The second compulsory subject should be the Qur'an, which every matriculate should have studied and understood well. The third should be Islamic beliefs — not just the details of the articles of faith, but the arguments for them, why man needs them, and their connection to practical life.

Fourth, our high-school students — who to this day are still taught the history of England — should study not only their own country's history but also become acquainted with Islamic history, including the history of the prophets, so they understand Islam as an eternal, ongoing movement rather than something that began abruptly in the seventh century CE.

3. Higher Education

Source: The Islamic System of Education — Maulana Syed Abul Ala Maududi — pages 23–26

At the higher-education stage we want a common curriculum in Islamic teaching for all students regardless of field, plus a specialized curriculum tailored to each field.

The common curriculum should include three things: (1) the Qur'an, taught so students both understand its teachings well and develop enough Arabic to understand it without translation; (2) a short compilation of Hadith covering Islam's basic principles, ethical teachings, and the Prophet's ﷺ character; (3) a comprehensive outline of the Islamic system of life — belief, worship, social life, ethics, civilization, economics, politics, and matters of peace and war — explained clearly and with sound reasoning.

The specialized curriculum should present, for each field, its own relevant Islamic concepts and background. For instance, philosophy students should also study Islamic philosophy alongside other systems — meaning not merely what Muslims absorbed from Aristotle, Plato, or Plotinus, nor the theology later scholastics built under Greek logical influence, but a genuinely reconstructed set of Islamic answers to philosophy's basic questions, rooted afresh in the Qur'an. History students, likewise, should study Islamic history and Islam's own philosophy of history alongside world history and other philosophies of history.

4. Specialized Education

Source: The Islamic System of Education — Maulana Syed Abul Ala Maududi — pages 26–28

After higher education comes specialized education, aimed at producing excellence in a particular field. Just as specialized education is arranged for other arts and sciences,

specialized education in the Qur'an, Hadith, and other Islamic sciences should likewise be arranged, so our country can produce top-level exegetes, hadith scholars, jurists, and religious scholars.

For this purpose, standard institutions of higher learning should be established with separate departments, open only to graduates or undergraduates, teaching: (1) Arabic literature, so students can read and understand advanced scholarly works and also write and speak Arabic; (2) Qur'anic sciences — principles and history of exegesis, the different schools' distinguishing features, followed by in-depth study of the Qur'an itself; (3) Hadith sciences — principles, history, and the science of criticism and authentication, followed by study of the original collections so students can themselves evaluate hadiths; (4) Fiqh (jurisprudence) — its principles, history, the distinguishing features of its schools, and the methods of deriving rulings from Qur'an and Hadith; (5) Theology and its history, giving students a comprehensive view of Muslim theologians' work; (6) Comparative religion, covering the teachings, distinguishing features, and history of the world's major religions.

Chapter Four: Necessary Measures and Related Issues

1. Necessary Measures for Implementation

Source: The Islamic System of Education — Maulana Syed Abul Ala Maududi — pages 29–30

This, in my view, is the outline of the education system that should be established in place of both the present religious and worldly systems. But the entire reform effort will remain fruitless unless, alongside the above reforms, the following measures are also taken.

The very first requirement is that we place the reins of education policy in the hands of people who hold an Islamic outlook, understand the Islamic education system, and want to establish it. This can only be accomplished by such people — not by those who neither know Islam nor have any desire to establish its education system.

It is equally necessary that in selecting teachers for our schools and colleges, we give their character, morals, and religious standing importance equal to — indeed greater than — their academic qualifications, reforming teacher training accordingly. Teachers of corrupt belief and morals can never give students the moral and mental training our new system requires.

2. Women's Education

Source: The Islamic System of Education — Maulana Syed Abul Ala Maududi — pages 31–32

As for women's education, it is just as necessary as men's education. No nation can advance in the world while keeping its women ignorant and backward. We must make arrangements for women's education as good as those for men's.

We should understand that our civilization differs fundamentally from Western civilization. Western civilization does not grant a woman rights or dignity until she is prepared to take on men's responsibilities. Our civilization, by contrast, grants a woman her rights precisely through fulfilling her natural responsibility — running the home and shaping human beings — assigning her only those responsibilities that nature itself has given her.

3. The Script Question

 Source: The Islamic System of Education — Maulana Syed Abul Ala Maududi — pages 33–35

There is a strange situation in our country: on one hand the need for national unity is repeatedly voiced, while on the other, there is no hesitation in reopening settled matters as fresh disputes. Of this kind is the recent debate stirred up over adopting the Roman script for Urdu and Bengali.

As for Urdu, changing its script from Arabic would not in itself be especially objectionable; typefaces could be developed until readers grew used to them. But adopting the Roman script — even if acceptable to the military and to those already familiar with it through British rule — is, for the nation as a whole, an extremely damaging step with far-reaching consequences.

Its first result would be that our entire Urdu literary heritage would become useless to new generations: either we would spend vast wealth and time reprinting our forebears' entire legacy in Roman script, or our new generations would grow up utterly estranged from their own past, with no traditions, no civilization, nothing to take pride in.

Its second, even greater loss would be that our scholarly progress would come to an abrupt halt, with much time wasted in the turmoil of the script change. Generations become accustomed to a script only gradually; suddenly switching an entire people to a new one is simply not something that can happen easily.

4. The Place of the English Language

 Source: The Islamic System of Education — Maulana Syed Abul Ala Maududi — pages 36

As for teaching the English language, no fair-minded person can deny its necessity and importance. But it is not merely wrong — it is severely harmful — for it to continue as the medium of instruction among us.

English should certainly be included in the curriculum as an important language, but keeping it as the medium of instruction is a serious mistake. Only if our new generations gain access to advanced arts and sciences in their own language can people of strong character, real self-respect, and pride in their own national civilization be produced among us.

Summary

Maududi's core argument is that Pakistan's two inherited education systems — the old religious madrasa system and the British-established secular system — are each, in their own way, inadequate and unfit for a free Muslim nation. Rather than reforming either, he calls for replacing both with a single new system built on three principles: (1) a clear purpose — producing individuals with genuine attachment to their national civilization and religion; (2) completely ending the separation of religion and worldly life, so every subject is taught from an Islamic standpoint; (3) character formation given equal weight to book learning. On this foundation he lays out a detailed scheme for primary, secondary, higher, and specialized education, and closes with the practical conditions needed for implementation, his views on women's education, the script controversy, and the place of the English language.

Bibliography

The Islamic System of Education — Maulana Syed Abul Ala Maududi, pages 5–36. Originally written as a memorandum to Pakistan's National Education Commission. This document is a translated compilation of that essay.